

# An Event Like No Other.

A St. Petersburg Café, Cabaret, Conference, "Kukhnia," and the Contemporary Russian Creative Intelligentsia. An International Forum/Festival: "Empire. The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov."  
...Plus Fireworks over the Fontanka

## Ellen Chances

The title of my article, "An Event Like No Other," is certainly an appropriate way to describe the "International Forum: Empire. The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov," that took place on October 1-4, 2007, in St. Petersburg, Russia, in honor of contemporary Russian writer Bitov's seventieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of his "creative activities." The Forum program described the event as "an attempt to create a new genre, a new form. This is not the traditional birthday celebration, not strictly a scholarly conference, and not a festival, but rather an experiment—to have, at one and the same time, both a deeply scholarly comprehension of phenomena of contemporary culture, and a spontaneous living dialogue with that culture."

True to the goal of intermingling scholarship with the creative arts, the Forum included scholarly papers, theatrical and musical performances, poetry readings, an art exhibit, the planting of a tree in the Botanical Garden, a visit to a statue, and the screening of an animated film. The entire event was magical, miraculous. The entire event was a testament to Bitov's own creative energy and free spirit.

The driving force behind the creation and execution of the Forum was the extraordinarily talented, remarkably energetic chief organizer, Marina Smirnova, at the time a twenty-four-year-old literary scholar writing a dissertation on Bitov at St. Petersburg University. (At one point, Bitov jokingly remarked that the only reason that he had agreed to the Forum was that he hadn't thought that it could be pulled off.) Smirnova had been a student and advisee of Bitov's wife, St. Petersburg University professor Natalya Gerasimova, who died on September 26, 2006. Smirnova told me that she and Gerasimova had had long discussions about what to do to celebrate Bitov's seventieth birthday. Smirnova also said that throughout the planning for the Forum and throughout the Forum

itself, she was profoundly aware of Gerasimova's guiding energy.

In addition to Smirnova, who is Executive Director of the international association, "Zhivaia klassika" (The Living Classics), the organizing committee consisted of Boris Averin, literary scholar, professor at St. Petersburg University and Chairman of the Board of "The Living Classics"; Anna Berdichevskaya, poet, philosopher, and editor of three of Bitov's books; Sergei Bocharov, literary scholar, a head senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow; Aleksandr Bolshev, St. Petersburg University professor and Development Director of "The Living Classics"; Maria Virolainen, literary scholar and head of the Department of Pushkin Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St. Petersburg; and myself. Institutional organizers included "The Living Classics," with support from the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature (St. Petersburg) and Gorky Institute of World Literature (Moscow), St. Petersburg University, and the Vladimir Nabokov Museum.

The Forum also received support from the Committee on Culture of the City of St. Petersburg. The working group that cheerfully and tirelessly took care of everything, from food, lodging and travel arrangements for the participants, to technological, media, and computer concerns, included Smirnova, Bolshev, Anna Abalakina, Aleksandr Beshpalov, Dmitry Fyodorov, Olga Lee, and the consulting group, Beshpalov and Partners. The media sponsors were the TV channel STO (St. Petersburg), and the FM radio station, "Radio Ekho Moskvyy" (Radio Moscow Echo) in St. Petersburg; "Coach" was an Information Partner. A website—[www.bitov.ru](http://www.bitov.ru)—still active, was set up, with information for the press, information about Forum events, a biography of Bitov and a bibliography of his works, biographies of the participants, and a



“photo gallery” of pictures taken during the preparation for the Forum and during the Forum itself.

With her enthusiasm, positive outlook, and indomitable spirit, Smirnova was able, Bitov told me, to negotiate arrangements for discounts, for example, for the Ambassador Hotel, the fancy four-star hotel where many Forum participants stayed. Food and liquor were lavishly presented to Forum participants. For instance, a Petersburg liquor company, Luding, donated its wares to dinners and receptions. At the Ambassador Hotel, the spread at an afternoon smorgasbord and banquet, and at the official opening of the Forum, was lavish, elegant, tasty and tasteful, literally and aesthetically. Hot lunch was served daily in the House of Architects, the building of the professional organization of architects, located across the street from the Nabokov Museum (47 Bolshaya Morskaya Street), where the scholarly conference sessions and certain other parts of the Forum took place. Bitov’s daughter, Anya, told me that she remembers, from her childhood, going to the House of Architects, since her grandfather, Bitov’s father, had been an architect.

Even the weather made a positive contribution to the celebration of Bitov in his native city of St. Petersburg. The weekend before the Forum began, the weather was sunny, with temperatures in the 70’s. In the city’s parks, the smell of autumn leaves commingled with the feel of warm, gentle air and the sight of the clear blue sky above. Throughout

the Forum, the weather continued to cooperate. The temperature was in the 50’s and 60’s, and although the sky was sometimes overcast, it rained, for the most part, only at night and/or when Forum events were taking place indoors.

One of the most enjoyable parts of the Forum was the texture of human interactions. Public birthday celebrations can sometimes feel false, pompous, “officialese,” lifeless. There was none of that at this event. One could feel a real authenticity. There was an atmosphere of genuine good will. The faces looked interesting. I felt as if this were one big “kukhnia” (kitchen), in that Russian sense of sitting “na kukhne” (in the kitchen), discussing, in freewheeling conversations, the “big questions” of life, the latest art exhibit, books, the fate of humanity, and—in Soviet times—where to find deficit items like lemons or toilet paper. Gathered at the Forum were young and old and in between, famous people and not, publishers, writers, editors, musicians and artists, scholars and students, a museum director and a government official, an architect and a film director, a theatre director and actors. What united everyone was a genuine interest in, respect for, and love of Bitov’s writings and, in the case of family and friends, of Bitov the person.

Tatyana Ponomareva, Director of the Nabokov Museum, graciously welcomed Forum participants to the museum and thanked Bitov for all his efforts at getting the Nabokov’s former house made into a museum.

One could tell, from the outset, that this was going to be unusual, even for the conference part of the Forum. Anna Florenskaya, one of the avant-garde “Mitki” artists, had asked several artists to paint pictures in order to decorate the walls of the Nabokov Museum room in which we were meeting, with paintings either of Bitov or of themes relevant to his writings. This was a beautiful wood-paneled room, which had once been a room in the home of Nabokov’s family as Nabokov was growing up. And now, in honor of Bitov, on the walls hung paintings which had been created specifically for the Forum. One showed a bird in a cage. (A section of Bitov’s novel, *Oglashennye* [The Monkey Link], is called “Ptitsy” [Birds].) Another painting was of a train, each car of which displayed a few letters of Bitov’s name. (Bitov has written many travelogues.) A third was a likeness of Bitov. A fourth showed structures that looked as if they were in the Caucasus. (Bitov wrote travelogues about Armenia and Georgia.) In the front of the room, on a wall, hung a large cloth clock, with the depiction of a closed umbrella as one of its hands.

On one wall there was a sculpture of a flying Bitov, complete with a suitcase and an umbrella. The “flying away Bitov” had resonances with Bitov’s frequent traveling and with his novel, *Uletaiushchii Monakhov* (The Disappearing Monakhov, or The Vanishing Monakhov, or The Flying Away Monakhov). An illustration related to that sculpture served as the Forum logo. Anna Florenskaya had

drawn the logo of the ever moving Bitov, facing away, leaving (again, the travel theme), that graced copies of the Forum programs, pens, notebooks and paper bags (imagined suitcases) that were given to participants. The logo also appears on the website.

For the entire four days of the Forum, TV and film crews, radio, TV, and newspaper correspondents were omnipresent, eager, for the benefit of transmission to broader audiences, to record Bitov’s words, and eager to capture the events held in his honor. Members of the media conducted many interviews with Bitov, and they also interviewed Forum participants, from near and far, from Russia and abroad. A four-part film about the Forum and about Bitov and his works was made for future viewing on the TV channel “Kul’tura” (Culture). As a public intellectual, Bitov’s opinions are sought, on TV and in newspaper and journal interviews. For several years, he wrote a column in the newspaper, *Russkaya gazeta*.

The title of the Forum, “Imperiia. Chetyre izmereniia Andreia Bitova” (Empire. The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov), was based on the title of a 1996 four-volume edition of Bitov’s selected works, *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniiakh* (Empire in Four Dimensions). Volume One includes largely fiction, whose setting is Leningrad/Petersburg (the novels, *Aptekarskii ostrov* [Apothecary Island]), *Dachnaia mestnost’. Dubl’* [Dacha District. A Double Take], and *Uletaiushchii Monakhov. Roman-punktir* (The Vanishing Monakhov. A Novel with Ellipses).





The second volume contains the novel *Pushkinskii dom* (Pushkin House). The third, *Kavkazskii plennik* (A Captive of the Caucasus), includes three of Bitov's travelogues, *Uroki Armenii* (Armenia Lessons), *Gruzinskii al'bom* (Georgian Album), and *Nash chelovek v Khive* (Our Man in Khiva). The last volume consists of his novel, *Oglashennye* (The Monkey Link). The empire is the Soviet empire, and the works deal with the Soviet Union, in time and in space, in a particular time period of the 1950s until the fall of the Soviet empire, and geographically, from one end of the Soviet Union to the other. Of course, the empire is also Bitov's own creative empire.

The Forum program was divided into four days. The theme for the first day was "Bitov about Literature, and Literature about Bitov." Ten out of the many publishers and editors of Bitov's works, from his earliest to the present, spoke about their experiences of publishing and editing Bitov in different publishing houses, in different venues, and in different time periods, i.e., at first during the oppressive Soviet era, and then in Gorbachev's era of *glasnost'*, and in post-Soviet Russia. Kira Uspenskaya, the editor of Bitov's first books, *Bol'shoi shar* (The Big Balloon, 1963), *Takoe dolgoe detstvo* (Such a Long Childhood, 1965), *Aptekarskii ostrov* (Apothecary Island), and *Sem' putestestvii* (Seven Journeys, 1976), spoke, among other things, about the minefields that she had to cross, within the publishing house *Sovetskii pisatel'* (Soviet Writer), in order to ensure that the house reviewers of Bitov's manuscript would be people with open minds, rather than hard-line ideologues who would be against Bitov's highly individualistic and decidedly not Socialist Realist prose. Bitov commented that in those years, how things got published was more interesting than what was written.

Uspenskaya's daughter, Anna, also an editor, as well as professor and scholar of Russian and ancient Greek poetry, turned out to be, because of the quirks of history, the editor of Bitov's final Soviet book publication. He was, she said, her favorite writer. Her publishing house, the Leningrad branch of *Sovetskii pisatel'*, had published Solzhenitsyn, among others. She suggested that Bitov also be published. That, she continued, was how the publication of Bitov's book of essays, *My prosnulis' v neznakomoi strane* (We Woke Up in an Unknown Country, 1991), came to be. The timing, though, was problematic. Soviet tanks had gone into Vilnius, so she worried about the fate of the book. It did get published, with a circulation of 100,000.

A slight aside: Anna Uspenskaya's daughter, Maria Andrianova, who attended the Forum, has written scholarly articles on Bitov's works, and is working on a book about his writings. Here, then, is a three-generation family cultural tie with Bitov's prose.

Sergei Shevelyov, editor of several of Bitov's books, including *Obraz zhizni. Povesti* (Image of Life. Tales, 1972) and *Dni cheloveka* (Days of Man, 1976), explained that the authorities didn't like Bitov because they didn't understand him. He said that with the publication of the almanac *Metropol'. Literaturnyi al'manakh* (Metropol. A Literary Almanac, 1979), which contained works of Soviet writers that had been rejected by the censors (Bitov was an editor and contributor),—and of course, with the publication, in the West, of *Pushkin House*,—all possibilities for publication ceased for Bitov. For example, he continued, *The Vanishing Monakhov* should have come out, but didn't. In 1980, Bitov had already thought up the design for the book, and Revaz Gabriadze was creating the illustrations. (It first came out as a separate book only in the *glasnost'* period, in 1990.)

Bitov expressed his enormous gratitude to Kira and Anna Uspenskaya, to Shevelyov, and to the other editors and publishers. He said that there is a kinship, almost a blood tie between him and them. He stated that to this very day, he has always depended on people in whose interest it *wasn't*—to publish him. In the Soviet period, this was for ideological reasons, and in post-Soviet times, because of market forces.

In their talks, the editors demonstrated their devotion to Bitov. For instance, Vladimir Kochetov, editor-in-chief of Vagrius publishers, and editor of Bitov's *Neizbezhnost' nenapisannogo* (The Inevitability of the Unwritten, 1998) for that publishing house, was impressed by the power in that book, as in *Pushkin House*, of Bitov's attention to psychological subtlety. He spoke, in glowing terms, about Bitov's genius. Liudmila Dorofeeva, editor of Bitov's *Molenie o chashe. Poslednii Pushkin* (Prayer about the Cup. The Late Pushkin, Fortuna EL Publishers, 2007), said that at the international book fair, the book sold briskly and almost sold out. Dorofeeva also edited, among other books, the edition of *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniiakh* (Fortuna Limited, 2002) that compresses all four volumes into one large book. Bitov joked that a friend of his said that it was too uncomfortable to read the book on the subway, and that it was too heavy a tome to read while lying in bed because it kept falling on his chest. He also said that in one way, he feels as if he

had written two or three books, and in another way, as if he had written dozens.

Andrei Aryev, co-editor-in-chief (together with Yakov Gordon), since 1992, of the journal *Zvezda*, gave a history of the Bitov works that had appeared in the journal. He explained that since there was no real literary criticism in the Soviet period, Bitov's writings were published with greater frequency than were articles about him. He stated that it was great that Bitov was able to publish substantive works in the Soviet Union. Confirming the observations of previous speakers, Aryev said that so much depended on the particular editor.

I spoke about the special issue of the West European journal, *Russian Literature* (Netherlands) that I had edited in 2007 in honor of Bitov's seventieth birthday. The contributors, almost all of whom participated in the Forum, included Priscilla Meyer, editor of *Life in Windy Weather* (1986), the first book, in English, of Bitov's prose; Susan Brownsberger, Bitov's translator into English of *Pushkin House, A Captive of the Caucasus*, and *The Monkey Link*; Ronald Meyer, author of "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*" (Indiana University, 1986), the first Ph.D. dissertation on Bitov; Elena Khvorostyanova, author of the first analysis of Bitov's volumes of poetry; Marina von Hirsch, writer of the first Ph.D. dissertation on Bitov's commentaries (Florida State University, 1997); Aleksandr Bolshev, for whom Bitov's works undermine values; and me, author of *Andrei Bitov*.

*The Ecology of Inspiration* (1993), the first book in any language on Bitov's oeuvre.

The topic of Bitov's participation in the cover design of the 1985 edition of *Gruzinskii al'bom* and in the design for *Dvorets bez tsaria* (*Palace without the Tsar*, 2003) came up. Bitov expressed his appreciation to the publishers, including Ivan Limbakh, for the 1995 edition of *Oglashennye*, and to the publishers of *Dvorets bez tsaria*, who, he said, had listened carefully to his "nonprofessional gibberish" about book design matters and had then helped him enormously with the realization of his ideas. He recalled the censors' removal of buttons from a photograph for the cover of the 1985 edition of *Gruzinskii al'bom*, because the buttons on a uniform were from the tsar's army.

In the evening of the first day of the Forum were the official opening ceremonies and "An Evening of Writers," both of which took place on the ninth floor of the Ambassador Hotel, with a grand panoramic view of Petersburg—and the ever-changing white-gray clouds that hovered above the city. The city government presented Bitov with a medal for his contributions to Petersburg literature, and a telegram from the Minister of Culture was read.

Boris Averin, who served as master of ceremonies of the "Evening of Writers," explained that we had first heard from publishers, and that it was now time, during a round table discussion, for



us to turn to writers to speak about Bitov. Bitov introduced Gleb Gorbovsky as his first teacher. Gorbovsky recalled their days together, fifty years ago, at the Mining Institute, when Bitov had first joined a literary group. Fellow member of the group, poet Lidiya Gladkaya, made the comment that even in the 1950s, people said that Bitov would be a great writer. His early story, "Babushkina piala" (Grandmother's Uzbek Cup), was already mature prose. She mentioned Bitov's benevolence and profound intelligence. Bitov said that he had suffered from an inferiority complex, thinking that they all were much better writers than he was.

Yuz Aleshkovsky, a friend of Bitov's for many decades, spoke about their close and long friendship. Writer Inga Petkevich, Bitov's first wife, said that for her, "Do Bitova ne bylo nichevo" (There was nothing before Bitov). She hadn't realized, she said, that he was an exception. She continued, "On sformiroval menia" (He shaped me). She emphasized his exemplary human, as well as artistic qualities. Peter Vail, writer, founding member of the Academy of Contemporary Russian Literature, and editor-in-chief of the Russian bureau of Radio Liberty, recalled the time in New York, in 1987, when he had heard Bitov at a reading. It was, for him, an event, he said.

Gabriadze, a longtime close friend of Bitov's, reminiscing about their first meeting at the advanced film courses in Moscow, declared that there are no accidents in life. Bitov said that they have known each other for forty-one years and that he is thankful to fate for their having met. Yakov Gordon said that Bitov and he had known each other since the late 1950s. He said that he was impressed by the "vibrancy of his style of living."

In introducing Sergei Nosov, Averin pointed out that the roundtable speakers included representatives of three generations of writers, the 1950s, the 1970s, and the present younger generation. Nosov said that Bitov unites rather than divides, and that he had taught many in Nosov's generation to be honest and not to sell themselves. He was struck, he continued, by the discomfort of honesty that he felt when he read his first Bitov work, "Penelopa" (Penelope). Bitov then suggested that Smirnova speak. She explained that she had gotten interested in Bitov when she read *Pushkin House*. After the end of the roundtable discussion, Forum participants hung around for awhile, enjoying good food, good drinks, and good company.

But the evening was not over. Buses were waiting to take us to the place along the Fontanka canal where the statue "Chizhik-pyzhik" is located.

"Chizhik" is a bird, a little siskin. Bitov and Gabriadze, as a sign of protest against the monumental larger than life Soviet statues, had thought up the idea of this tiny statue, approximately five inches tall. It is in a place close to the water itself. One would not know that it was there without bending over the railing to see it, perched on its pedestal, observing life in the canal. Some say that the Petersburg city government has duplicates of the statue because as a prank, it gets stolen from time to time. People throw coins at the pedestal for good luck, and the statue has become an unofficial tourist attraction. "Chizhik-pyzhik" is based on a famous nineteenth-century student song that generation after generation has been singing. The words are:

Chizhik-pyzhik, gde ty byl?  
Na Fontanke vodku pil.  
Vypil riumku, vypil dve.  
Zakruzhilos' v golove.

Chizhik-pyzhik, where've you been?  
On the Fontanka, drinking vodka.  
I drank one glass, I drank two.  
My head began to spin around.

In honor of Bitov's and Gabriadze's statue, yellow plastic cups of vodka and plates of cut-up pickles were waiting for us on the canal's stone railing. The evening was autumn-brisk, but not ice-cold, and the sky, a clear blue-black. A large October yellow-orange moon, silent, slowly made its way ever higher above us, as its reflection played on the water's surface below. And then, suddenly, across the canal, there was a fireworks display, to celebrate Bitov's birthday. (Smirnova had received permission from the St. Petersburg city government.) Two streaks of yellow-white sparkled and spun, and in the center glowed the number 70.

As people dispersed, a *bâteau-mouche*, like those in Paris on the Seine, slid through the waters, its lights doubling in reflected light upon the surface of the black canal. Blue balloons were released into the Petersburg night air, and we could hear people on the deck shouting, in unison, "Bi-tov. Bi-tov." So ended the first day of the Forum.

On the second day, some scholarly papers were presented. (The full text of the papers will be published in a volume, *Imperiia. Chetyre izmereniia Andreia Bitova*, edited by Smirnova.) Sergei Bocharov and Maria Virolainen chaired the sessions. Boris Averin commented that his generation liked Bitov's prose for its confessional quality; he spoke about



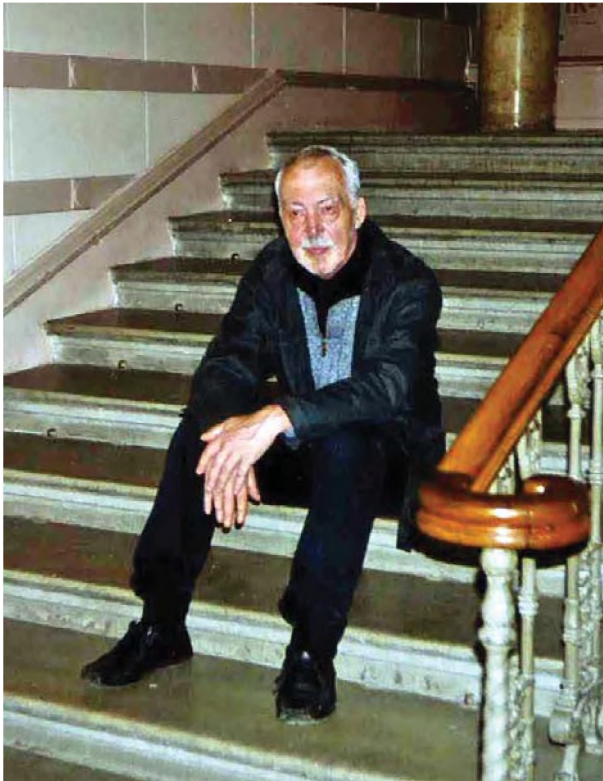








the plurality of “I”s in Bitov’s *Neizbezhnost’ nenapisannogo*. Igor Smirnov, professor at Konstanz University as well as Petersburg’s State Pedagogical University, and co-editor of the journal, *Die Welt der Slaven*, concentrated on Bitov’s protagonists’ capacity to think and on his ability, regardless of genre, to address the universal. He recalled a 1986 interview in Berlin, during which the important question, for Bitov, was “What is the human being?” Ronald Meyer, translator, and Publications Officer at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute, focused on *Uletaiushchii Monakhov*, and on Bitov’s changes to that novel, from 1962 to 2007. Aleksandr Velikanov, an architect and friend of Bitov’s, who had written a section of commentary to Bitov’s novel, *Oglashennye*, spoke about the way in which the structure of that novel corresponds to modern tendencies in architecture, for example, hiding things and then, as in the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris, showing what is usually concealed. Literary scholar and translator Marina von Hirsch discussed the parallels of chemistry and Bitov’s “*Tablitsa ambitsii*” (Table of Ambitions), in the commentary to *Oglashennye*. Wolf Schmid, professor of Slavics at Hamburg University and chairman of the Pushkin Prize jury, observed that Bitov is the only intellectual contemporary Russian writer. He emphasized the fresh new and defamiliarized ways in which Bitov sees the familiar world, whether in his fiction or in

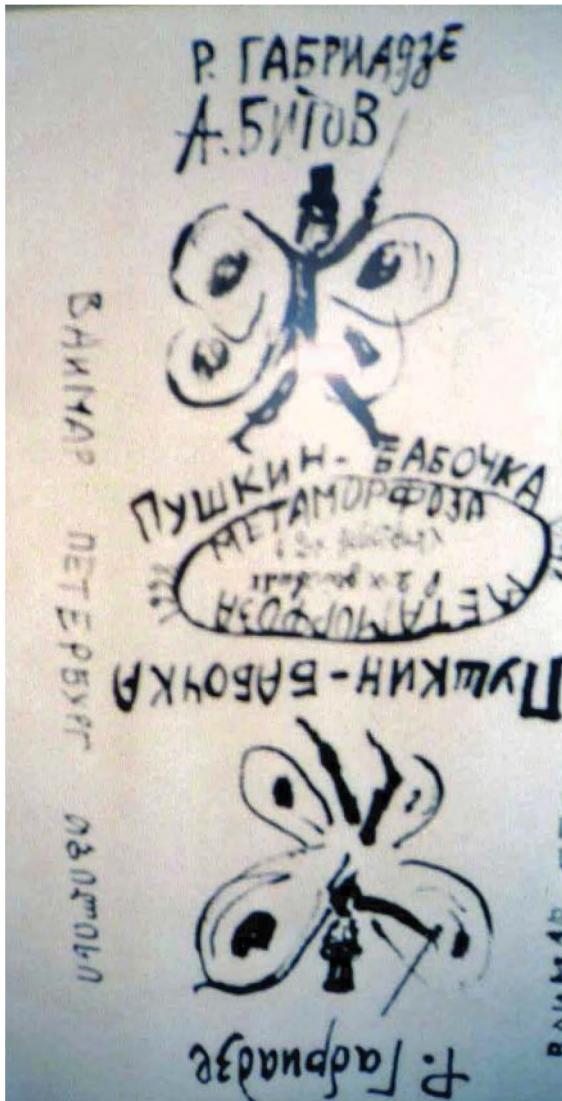


his travelogues. Andrei Aryev spoke, among other things, about the question posed, in Bitov, of whether human duality can be transcended. Elena Khvorostyanova, a literary scholar at St. Petersburg University, highlighted the lyrical “I” of Bitov’s prose narrators—whether first, second, or third person—that was the same as in his poetry.

The remaining activities of the second day of the Forum focused on Bitov and Petersburg. In one of his early short stories, “Avtobus” (The Bus), the protagonist meanders through Leningrad on a bus. We Forum participants went, on a bus, on a “*puteshestvie s Bitovym*” (journey with Bitov), an excursion to Bitov places, to some of the significant Petersburg places connected to his life and work. Bitov pointed out the house in which he and Inga Petkevich had lived; and the house in which Natalya Gerasimova had lived before they were married. When we crossed a bridge that he had written about in “Avtobus,” he said that from there had begun his “empire.” He added that gazing at the picture-postcard view from the bridge, approximately fifty years ago, had come, no doubt, from his unwillingness to go to school.

He showed us Aptekarskii ostrov (Apothecary Island), the section in Petersburg, an academic region, in which he had grown up. He showed us the Karpovka River, similar to “a small river in the countryside,” in whose “turbid waters” he and his friends had swum, “on oil,” as he put it. He showed us the house itself, Aptekarskii ostrov 6 (6 Apothecary Island). As we have seen, the title of one of his books is *Aptekarskii ostrov*. Another is called *Pervaia kniga avtora. Aptekarskii ostrov, 6* (The Author’s First Book. 6 Apothecary Island, 1996). As we stood in the courtyard, Bitov pointed out the windows of the third floor apartment where his family had lived. When Bitov was already an adult, his mother had had to move out because the building had been taken over by some kind of government institute.

Petersburg’s Botanical Garden is located across the street from the writer’s former house. That was our next destination, on foot. Bitov told us that for several years, he used to jog, every day, for about 2½ kilometers, in those “beautiful gardens.” He was, he said, “preparing himself for literature.” Once in the park, among the tall and tranquil trees, we met up with Gennady Popov, a gardener at the Botanical Garden. He and his colleagues had chosen a tree to be planted in Bitov’s honor. We all watched—Forum participants and media crews—as Bitov, with Popov’s guidance, planted the Japanese red pine (*sosna gustotsvetkovaia*; *pinus*



densiflora). It is a tree that usually grows in the Russian Far East and in Japan.

Bitov had wanted a cedar in honor of his mother, whose maiden name was Kedrova ("kedr" is the Russian word for cedar), but the Botanical Garden had not been able to find one. David Matevosian, the son of a close friend of Bitov's, the deceased Armenian writer, Grant Matevosian, promised that a cedar would be planted in Armenia.

It makes sense that a tree would be planted in Bitov's honor for reasons besides the biographical tie to the Botanical Garden—and that is his interest in ecology and in trees. He was writing about the need to preserve the environment *before* most people turned their attention to the subject. One example is his impassioned cry, in *Pushkin House*, written in 1964-71, for human beings to stop exploiting natural resources before it is too late. One of his stories is

called "Les" (The Forest), and one of his books, *Derevo* (The Tree).

The next event was the performance of a "monospektakl'," a one-man, one-act play, "Bezdel'nik" (The Idler), based on Bitov's 1961 story of that name, and starring the award-winning actor, Vyacheslav Zakharov. There was no curtain, and there were no props—only Zakharov seated on a chair with an exposed brick wall behind him. The actor's performance was spellbinding and powerful. His interpretation of "Bezdel'nik" highlighted, in a fresh, new way, the deep existential dimensions of the story.

The performance took place in the art-café, "Podval brodiachei sobaki" (The Stray Dog Basement), restored site of the early twentieth-century Stray Dog Cabaret, whose guests had included major Russian cultural figures, including, among others, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Blok, and "Mir iskusstva" (World of Art) artists. As we watched the play, we were seated at small tables, sipping coffee and wine.

Our last stop that evening was Pushkin House, the Russian Academy of Sciences Literary Institute—and the title, of course, of Bitov's novel. Many of the novel's scenes take place in Pushkin House. Bitov told us that he had never actually been inside the institute until many years after finishing the novel. He, his wife Natalya, and their young son, Yegor, went there for a New Year's party. They dressed up as the Three Musketeers. Circus actors came, too, Bitov said, and their dogs were wearing Three Musketeer costumes.

We climbed up to the tower, where Bolshev had prepared the exhibit "Commentaries to the Novel *Pushkin House*." I had conceived the idea for the exhibit. In the commentary to *Pushkin House*, Bitov explains that he will not comment on the obscure things that scholars usually comment upon, but rather on those things that are familiar to people in a particular time period, on those things that get lost—a song, a cigarette brand, a particular kind of child's toy. My idea had been to create an exhibit out of those objects that he mentioned in the commentary. Thus, Bitov lent a teakettle that he said had been used by the character, Uncle Dickens, in the novel. There was a Gillette razor, a pack of "Sever" (North) cigarettes, also mentioned in the novel and commentary, and a recording of a song popular at that time. There were pictures and newspaper clippings of some of the historical figures mentioned. And in that beautiful Pushkin House tower, some of the Forum participants—



Wolf Schmid and others—waltzed to the melody that was being played, while we all socialized, looked at the exhibit, partook of yet more refreshments, and the TV correspondents interviewed Bitov and others.

The third day of the Forum, entitled “Kavkazskii plennik” (A Captive of the Caucasus), featured the same two cultures, Armenian and Georgian, that Bitov wrote about in the two travelogues, *Uroki Armenii* and *Gruzinskii Al'bom*, that are in *Kavkazskii plennik*, the third volume of Bitov's *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniiakh*. Nina Gabrielian, an Armenian poet, prose writer, artist, literary critic, and translator of classical and contemporary poetry of the east, chaired the session devoted to Bitov and Armenia. Yerevan State University had awarded him an honorary doctoral degree, and he had been made an honorary citizen of the city of Yerevan. At the Forum, David Matevosian, on behalf of the Armenian Minister of Culture, presented him with a gold medal for all that he had done for Armenia, in allowing, through *Armenia Lessons*, the rest of the world to learn about Armenian culture. On behalf of the rector of Yerevan State University, from the professors and students, in appreciation of his continuing the line of Andrey Bely, Valery Briusov, and Osip Mandelstam that served as “guides” to Armenia, Matevosian gave Bitov a watch. Bitov jokingly asked, “Are you sure the watch works?” As he pointed to the cloth clock on the wall, he added, “I believe only in that clock.” He then said, “Maybe I'm also Armenian,” and pointed out that some of his early prose, such as the story, “Obraz” (The Image) had first been published in Armenia. He thanked David Matevosian for getting *Armenia Lessons* translated into Armenian.

Matevosian then spoke about his father's and Bitov's friendship, and about the poem, “Grantu” (To Grant) that Bitov had written about his father, adding, after his death, two new lines to the poem:

Esli verit' im, to my s toboi tsari,  
Kak derev'ia: srubiat i – gori!

If one believes them [our mothers – E.C.],  
then you and I are tsars,  
Like trees, we'll be chopped down and – burn!

Matevosian explained that the word “tsar,” in Armenian, means “tree.” He then showed what he called “human slides” of the two writers.

Gabrielian's paper focused on transformational aspects of Bitov's *Armenia Lessons*, of the journey from oneself to oneself. Peter Vail spoke about

Bitov's *Armenia Lessons* containing more about Armenia than Mandelstam's *Puteshestvie v Armeniiu* (*Journey to Armenia*) did. He also said that no one before Bitov, in that book, had talked about the ecological catastrophe that befell Lake Sevan. Grigorian's paper compared an essay Bitov had written about Matevosian with a “Postscript” essay that he wrote twenty years later.

During a break between sessions, young women, dressed in Armenian folk costumes, served glasses of Armenian cognac. Serdak Papikian, Director of the Cultural Center of the Moscow city branch of the Union of Armenians in Russia, also dressed in Armenian national costume, sang Armenian folk songs about love. Musician Aleksandr Movsesian, winner of Russian and international prizes in folklore festivals and competitions, played melancholy minor-key melodies on a fifteenth-century Armenian stringed instrument, the kemancha, which looked, to the untrained eye, as if it belonged to the same general family as the guitar, the violin, and banjo.

After we had been serenaded, we heard the remaining papers about Bitov and Armenia. An Armenian international affairs journalist, Viliam Mkrtchan, whose career assignments had included a several-year stint as Tass correspondent in Washington, recalled that his grandmother had urged him to learn Russian. It was only after he had read *Armenia Lessons*, he admitted, that he began reading other things in Russian—like Tolstoy's novels and Pasternak's translations of Shakespeare. (In his paper, Ronald Meyer had also mentioned his grandmother, crediting her with introducing him to his first reading of a Russian novel, Tolstoy's *Voina i mir* [War and Peace]. This is the only conference I had ever been to, where panelists discussed their grandmothers. This, then, too, was another way in which the Forum was different from other conferences.) In *Armenia Lessons*, he went on, Bitov had, for the first time, given him, an Armenian, a sense of the reality of the Armenia that he, Mkrtchan, had lived in all his life. Quoting historian Ronald Suny, Mkrtchan said that Bitov noticed what other people didn't.

Roman Shubin, a literary scholar at the M. Abegian Literary Institute of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, argued for viewing *Armenia Lessons* through the lens of *Gulliver's Travels*. He also suggested parallels between Swift's and Bitov's attention to the human being's biological nature. Poet Gevorg Gilants, also writing a dissertation at the Abegian Literary Institute, finished off the

Armenia section with his comments about landscape.

The two chairs of the “Georgian Album” session of the Forum were Anna Berdichevskaya, who, in addition to being a publisher of three of Bitov’s books, is a poet and photographer; and Natalya Sokolovskaya, who, besides editing several Bitov books, is a writer of prose and poetry, and a translator. Part of the session on Georgia was the opening of a two-part exhibit—in two rooms to one side of the wood-paneled room—of illustrations by Gabriadze, with words by Bitov, originally created for an unrealized production in Weimar. The exhibit was called “Pushkin—Babochka—Metamorfoza” (Pushkin—Butterfly—Metamorphosis”). Gabriadze explained the origin of the exhibit. Someone had said that there are no butterflies in Pushkin’s works. Bitov had said that in fact, there was something about butterflies, in an 1825 rough draft, sketch of a poem by Pushkin. Thus was born the playful “Pushkin—Butterfly” creation, complete with Pushkin saying that a tree with a hat on top reminds him of himself.

Gabriadze went on to say that he had created the other part of the exhibit especially for the Forum: a set of illustrations, black paper and gold, based on Bitov’s story, “Fotografiia Pushkina” (Pushkin’s Photograph).

In a curious instance of “accidental symmetry,” to use Bitov’s words from his 1963 story, “Zhizn’ v vetrenuiu pogodu” (Life in Windy Weather), the “Pushkin—Butterfly” exhibit was in a room to the left of the room in the Nabokov Museum in which many Forum sessions were being held, and in a room to the right of the meeting room, there was a permanent Museum exhibition, with specimens of Nabokov’s butterflies. It was as though each of the two rooms was a butterfly wing...

Bitov and Gabriadze, friends for over forty years, each spoke about the great talents of the other, and about the deep personal meaning that their friendship had. Bitov, who has written about Gabriadze, said that Russian culture and the Russian soul are nothing without the Crimea and Georgia. Gabriadze spoke of the importance of Bitov as a writer. For him, he said, his friendship with Bitov was not a friendship, but rather “voskhishchenie” (rapture) and that he was very much indebted to him for the beauty that he creates with the tenderness and power that are in him. Gabriadze then presented him with a puppet of Bitov as a Georgian prince, which he had created for the writer’s fiftieth birthday.

As part of the session, the audience was shown an animated film of Bitov’s and Gabriadze’s “Svobodu Pushkinu” (Freedom to Pushkin), a whimsical, humorous account of what would have happened, had Pushkin gone abroad.

Natalya Sokolovskaya introduced a chorus of four male voices, who sang Georgian songs. She then read quotations from *Georgian Album*, including Bitov’s words about the classic Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli. That was a lead-in to her presentation, to Bitov, of Rustaveli’s “Vitiáz’ v tigrovom shkure” (A Knight in Tiger Skin), in Russian and Georgian, which she described as the “Georgian Bible” that represented the very faith that Bitov enjoyed with his friends.

Olga Kutmina, literary scholar and docent at Omsk University, rounded off the session by giving a talk on being held captive to Bitov’s *A Captive of the Caucasus*. She spoke about all of his prose, not just his film scenario, “Zapovednik” (The Wildlife Preserve), being like a wildlife preserve.

The final event of the day, before an evening theatre performance, was a lecture on Bitov’s story, “Penelope,” by literary scholar, critic, and head of the literary criticism section of the journal *Novyi mir*, Irina Rodnianskaya. Her focus was on what she saw as three films in the story—French New Wave cinema, the movie *The Odyssey* that the story’s two characters watch, and the narrator’s description of the main character Lobyshev and of Nevsky Prospect in terms that are suggestive of a film. She also spoke about the image of women in “Penelope” as being similar to the image of women in other Bitov works, such as *Pushkin House*. In addition to Lobyshev’s state in “Penelope,” she discussed the frequency of split heroes in Bitov’s prose.

The theatre performance, in Petersburg’s Lensovet Theater, turned out to be the world premiere of the play, *Penelope*, based on that same story. Directed by award-winning director Grigory Kozlov, the play starred Sergei Agafonov as Lobyshev and Ekaterina Gorokhovskaya as Penelope. In the excellent production, the character of Lobyshev is made into a writer, seated, at times, at a typewriter on one side of the stage, a bit removed from the action. It was a wise creative decision, on Kozlov’s part, to make Lobyshev into a writer, something that he is not in the story, and to place him, from time to time, at the side of the stage, at a typewriter. This corresponded visually and in substance, to Lobyshev’s distancing behavior in the story. The minimal stage set included distorting mirrors, which emphasized the distorted behavior of Bitov’s Lobyshev. The young actors, in their







interpretations of the characters, highlighted the timeless, universal human emotions depicted in "Penelope," even though the story itself had had a particular time-bound appeal to people in the Soviet Union of the 1960s.

After the play, Forum participants gathered, for refreshments, in the theatre's buffet, a palace-like elegant room with high ceilings and small cozy tables. Kozlov, Agafonov, and Gorokhovskaya were there, too, so that people could informally discuss the performance with them.

A large portion of the last day of the Forum was devoted to scholarly papers. Wolf Schmid and I co-chaired the sessions. A great many perspectives on Bitov's writings were discussed. Literary scholar and St. Petersburg University professor Igor Sukhikh spoke about Bitov's *Piatoe izmerenie* (The Fifth Dimension), a book of essays on literature and culture. He spoke about the "philological" quality of Bitov's thought, and about the fact that Bitov writes things that force us to think—for example, his essay on Erich Maria Remarque as a sociological phenomenon. Irina Surat, a literary scholar who has collaborated with Bitov on some of his books on Pushkin, and who, in 2007, edited a special issue of the journal *Oktiabr'*, in honor of Bitov's seventieth birthday, talked about Bitov's writings on Pushkin. He was the first, she said, to make Pushkin, the person, come alive for us and help us live. Pushkin, she said, saved Bitov in hard times, and for him, the main lesson of Pushkin, is *life*. Sergei Bocharov's paper emphasized the fact that no writer before Bitov had, in his writings, discussed the moral responsibility of the author. In my paper, I talked about the similarity of certain ideas in Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh* to some ideas in Bitov's works, and about Bitov, in many works, reducing things to their essence. Rosemarie Tietze, the longtime translator of Bitov's works into German, spoke about what she called the new genre of "shadow commentary." When she and Bitov would go on a book tour and Bitov would answer questions about the problems of life and literature, these discussions, said Tietze, are texts, although they are rarely preserved. When she asks him questions about the text she is translating, he offers stylistic analyses or pieces of information, as for example, details about the peasant who sells champagne bottle corks at the open market.

Poet, translator, and literary scholar Viktor Kulle noted parallels between Kafka's *Trial* and Bitov's "Zapiski iz-za ugla" (Notes from around the Corner), and commented on the nature of time in "Our Man in Khiva." Priscilla Meyer, a professor of



Russian literature at Wesleyan University and the author of over 100 scholarly publications, concentrated her remarks on parallels she observed between Philip Roth and Bitov. Both, she said, were born in the 1930s. Both use autobiographical narration. Both have doubles in their work. Roth's touchstone, said Meyer, is Shakespeare, whereas for Bitov, it is Pushkin. Tatyana Shemetova, a literary scholar at Buriat University, spoke about Bitov's characterization of Pushkin's writings as "a unified text" and saw Tolstoy's *Detstvo. Otrochestvo. Iunost'* (Childhood. Adolescence. Youth) as a paradigm for *Pushkin House*.

Smirnova saw the stories in *The Vanishing Monakhov* as a unified text, pointing out, for example, the obstacles the protagonist encounters in each part of the novel. Sergei Yakovlev, a prose writer and literary scholar, discussed the loss of national identity, the issue of "the writer and the people," and the question of a "Russian ethics" in Bitov's works. Pushkin specialist Sergei Fomichev, a literary scholar and a chief senior researcher at Pushkin House, spoke about Griboedov and



Pushkin, about Pushkin's *Puteshestvie v Arzrum* (Journey to Arzrum), and about Bitov's having turned people's attention to the Griboedov episode in Pushkin's life. Kiev Pedagogical University scholar Aleksandr Yudin emphasized the self-realization, including the unpleasant things that one would rather not know about oneself, which came up as he read Bitov. He talked about Bitov's method of self-analysis that gets the reader to become involved in his or her own self-analysis.

After the conclusion of the scholarly papers, Pyotr Kozhevnikov, a screenwriter, director, TV writer and host, and author of prose, showed a home movie of Bitov, his wife Natalya, and their son, Yegor, from several years ago. In it were scenes of the family in its Petersburg apartment and at its dacha. There were also shots of the traveling Bitov, arriving by train to Petersburg from Moscow.

The final activities of the Forum took place in Petersburg's Jazz Philharmonic Hall. On stage, the backdrop was a painting of jazz musicians. The audience, as in a jazz club or a cabaret, was seated at small tables, where food and drink were served throughout the evening. Bella Akhmadulina read some of her poetry, including poems connected to Pushkin. Yuz Aleshkovsky sang some of his dissident songs. Then the Bitov-Quintet performed "Chasy pechal'nykh il'" (The Hours of Sorrowful Ors). Bitov read rough drafts of Pushkin poems, "Stikhi, sochinennye noch'iu vo vremia bessonnitsy" (Verses Composed During a Night of Insomnia), an unfinished 1824 poem, "Zachem ty poslan byl?" (Why Were You Sent?), and a poem from the last year of his life, what he called a last will and testament. He ended with the finished version of Pushkin's 1835 poem, "Vnov' ia posetil" (I Once Again Visited). As if in tribute, Bitov gave the date on which Pushkin had written that poem—September 26—which is, of course, the day in September on which Bitov's wife Natalya had died. As he recited the poetry, jazz musicians Aleksandr Aleksandrov (bassoon), Yury Parfenov (trumpet) and his son (double bass), and Vladimir Tarasov (drums) improvised. Bitov has pointed out that during their performances, his human voice sounds like a musical instrument, and the musical instruments sound like human voices.

Writer Liudmila Petrushevskaya was the last performer of the evening. She came out on stage in a black dress, black tights, black high heels, and a wide-brimmed black hat with a veil, and announced that she would sing cabaret songs. She sang "Les Champs-Élysées," "Lili Marlene," and finally, a song that she called "Blues," for which, she said,

she had composed her own words, in Russian. It's a melody that I know, in English, as "Dream a Little Dream for Me."

So ended the Forum.

After all that, where are we? The entire Forum reflected Bitov's free spirit, his creative spirit. With all of the things that we hear about gloom and doom in the world, it is wonderful to know that in Petersburg, the creative intelligentsia is very much alive and well, ...and is definitely having fun, too. I hope that the readers of this article have had fun learning about those magical, miraculous days of celebration of the many dimensions of Andrei Bitov's unique creative "empire."

P.S. In an instance of "accidental symmetry," a poster of James Joyce's *Dublin Days* hung on a wall in the cloakroom of the Nabokov Museum. The name of Bitov's cat is Joyce, named after the writer.

P.S. again ...Not far from Bitov's former house, our bus had gone by a sign, with words that I had never before seen on a billboard: "Verite v chudo?" (Do you believe in miracles?)

**Ellen Chances is Professor of Russian literature and culture at Princeton University, and the author of *Andrei Bitov. The Ecology of Inspiration* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). The Russian translation, *Andrei Bitov. Ekologiya vdokhnoveniia*, trans. I. Larionov, came out in St. Petersburg in 2007. She was guest editor and a contributor to a special issue of the journal, *Russian Literature* (The Netherlands), *In Honour of Andrej Bitov's Seventieth Birthday* (vol. 61, no. 4, 2007).**

**Other scholarly publications include the book, *Conformity's Children. An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature*, and dozens of articles. Her scholarly interests include the nineteenth, twentieth, and now, twenty-first-century novel; Bitov; Dostoevsky; Chekhov; the thick journal; Kharmis; the ethical dimensions of contemporary Russian cinema; and comparative Russian and American literature and culture. She is also a writer of essays, memoir, fiction, and poetry.**

## Illustrations

page 7: One of the artistic works created for the Forum. A "flying away" Bitov, based on the title of Bitov's novel, *The Flying Away Monakhov*.

page 8: Olga Lee, Marina Smirnova, and Ellen Chances in a Petersburg café the night before the Forum began. (Photo by Anna Abalakina.)

page 10: The Gabriadze-Bitov statue, "Chizhik-Pyzhik," on the Fontanka Canal. (Photo by Loki, Wikimedia Commons)

page 12: The house in which Bitov grew up, Aptekarskii ostrov, 6 (Apothecary Island, 6); Bitov and TV and film cameras, in the courtyard of Aptekarskii ostrov, 6.

page 13: Bitov planting the tree in his honor in St. Petersburg's Botanical Garden.

page 14: Bitov in Pushkin House.

page 15: Revaz Gabriadze/Andrei Bitov exhibit, "Pushkin—Babochka—Metamorfoza" (Pushkin—Butterfly—Metamorphosis).

page 18: Bella Akhmadulina reciting her poetry; Bitov and jazz musicians. Both photos taken in Jazz Philharmonic Hall.

page 19: Liudmila Petrushevskaya sings cabaret songs during the farewell evening held at the Jazz Philharmonic Hall.

*Photos by Ellen Chances, unless otherwise noted.*